The Lottery We Call Merit:

You Are Not What the System Says You Are

by Boyd Camak

Editorial note: This essay was drafted by Claude.ai (Anthropic) based on the author's dictated thoughts and editorial direction. Language appearing in italics represents Boyd Camak's own words, drawn directly from his dictation.

Human nature, left to its own devices, is self-destructive, greedy, violent. Even the so-called achievements of civilization are built on violence. That is the backdrop. Everything else follows from it.

The postwar American middle class was historically unusual — sustained by a unique global moment and by policy choices that would later prove politically fragile. It was *a unique phenomenon driven in large part by the fact that the rest of the world had been bombed to hell by World War 2*. America held the cards — the industry, the infrastructure, the gold — and a framework emerged, built on labor power, the GI Bill, and deliberate policy, that distributed some of that advantage broadly. Then, beginning before Reagan and accelerating sharply under him, *corporate interests were able to unwind, slash, get rid of most of the framework that supported the continuation of the middle class.*

Technology did the rest. It *accelerated outsourcing and offshoring, shipping jobs to different destinations around the world,* and in doing so built *a practically permanent supply chain and infrastructure that cannot be taken back*. The capillaries of production rebuilt themselves elsewhere. You cannot simply will them home. Meanwhile, technology *raised the learning curve* and made it easier to concentrate work in tech hubs, creating jobs that were *highly specialized* — jobs that would be *very hard for a mid-career small town business owner, for example, to transition into.*

The institutions that were supposed to help with that transition failed systematically. *Community colleges and other players in the education and retraining space were always a step behind.* The people who did get their degrees found themselves *not as employable as they thought they would be.* Parts of the for-profit college industry *rose up* and were subsequently exposed for predatory practices and fraud — in several cases forced to close entirely. And the conventional wisdom of STEM — *science, technology, engineering, math* — that framework was supposed to be *the hard way that led to security and prosperity*. Artificial intelligence is *detonating that* in real time.

The economic landscape was being reshaped from above as well. Big-box retailers became *category killers* that *put small businesses out of business.* The internet *connected people in ways that were new,* and figures like Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg *pounced on that and created monopolies that colonized whole sections of the economy and society.* Amazon, in particular, came to dominate retail, logistics, and cloud infrastructure — *colonizing the entire economy*. Large companies *routinely lay*

off thousands of people — not as a last resort, but as a standard instrument of financial management. This is not accidental. Kathryn Tanner of Yale argues that today's economy is finance-dominated: profits come less from making things and more from financial activity, and finance increasingly sets the terms for the rest of economic life as well. The incentives are perverse by design. And *even if a CEO wanted to step aside on principle, the system would replace him overnight.*

Into all of this steps the ideology of meritocracy — and this is where the argument sharpens into something more than economic analysis.

The system produces losers, then moralizes their losing, then calls the outcome fair. That is the meritocracy lie. The political argument is this: *meritocracy is no different from a feudal system or an oligarchy. It just happens to favor different people, different categories that people fall into.* In a different era, the valued trait might be *physical strength, or stamina,* or whatever virtues are required to be a farmer, or a warrior, or a lord. Today it is intellectual giftedness, credentials, proximity to capital. The currency changes. The structure of exclusion does not.

Ethically, spiritually speaking, a meritocracy is no better than an oligarchy. Because the system *systematically excludes people who are disabled, who are not intellectually gifted, who are emotionally damaged and abused, who don't have access to the funds needed to pursue the education they are capable of.* And then — this is the cruelest move — it tells them their exclusion is deserved. It manufactures shame out of circumstance. It takes what was a lottery and calls it a judgment.

But the title of this essay cuts both ways. *You are not what the system says you are* is not only a word to the excluded. It is equally a word to those the system crowns. The Gospels are not ambiguous on this point. Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Woe to you who are rich. That is not a peripheral teaching. It runs through the Gospels like a spine, and it sits in direct tension with the American mythology that baptizes wealth as virtue and poverty as failure.

This brings us to resentment — *one of the most toxic states, both for oneself and for those around us.* The people left behind by deindustrialization, by the broken promise of education, by the foreclosure of Main Street, carry real grievances. The shame the system imposed on them does not stay quiet. It curdles. It becomes resentment. And resentment, once formed, does not stay targeted — it spreads, distorts, and becomes available for manipulation. It has *fueled a populism that is destructive* — one that powerful actors are happy to aim, because aimed resentment is useful, and resolved grievance is not. This is not new. It is the same human nature it has always been.

Which is precisely the point. *The same world we have is the same human nature we have.* And that human nature, left to its systems and its judgment seats, condemned an innocent man. Even the Roman official who ordered the execution declared the condemned innocent before carrying out the sentence anyway. If anyone needs a shortcut through the analysis, they need look no further than that.

But Christ is not merely a diagnosis of the problem. *Christ walked his walk all the way to the cross* — falling, needing help to carry it, and going anyway. His birth, his teaching,

his death, his resurrection — these are not disconnected events. They are one statement, made in flesh and blood. As the Orthodox theologian and priest Thomas Hopko put it in his lecture "The Word of the Cross," Christ is the incarnation of all teaching. He does not merely describe the kingdom of God. He is it. And the kingdom he describes — and embodies — is one in which the last are first, the shamed are restored, and no system's verdict is the final word on a human life.

So what is to be done? The answer cannot be a program, a platform, or a movement with a leader. *That is not how human nature works.* The one who had the answer was crucified. *The one who is the answer is a dead man on a tree.*

What remains is not a plan but a posture. *All people of goodwill should discern their own next steps.* That may include a vision. It may not. *Most of it is probably just going to be regular stuff — regular, day to day stuff.* But we should not rule out *breaking out of that normal routine in order to engage politically, or to build relationships across racial lines, across political lines — whatever the spirit leads.* Tanner's insight points in a similar direction: the work includes *creating spaces in our communities — if you can even call them communities — that don't obey market logic.*

It's not a neat process. The kingdom of God is like scattering seeds. Not all of them are going to grow. And you're probably not even going to know about the ones that did.

That is how the world is saved. Not through a top-down ninety-day plan. But through people who know they are not what the system says they are — and act accordingly.